

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-02 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 /057 W
-----004202 260438Z /70

R 251300Z JAN 78
FM AMEMBASSY COTONOU
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0382
INFO AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN
AMEMBASSY ACCRA
AMCONSUL IBADAN
AMEMBASSY LAGOS
AMEM ACSY LOME
"RUFHYC/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 2921

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, DM
SUBJ: REPORTED DEATH OF FORMER PRESIDENT APITHY

1. EMBASSY HAS BEEN INFORMED BY VARIOUS SOURCES THAT FORMER PRESIDENT OF DAHOMEY SOUROU-MIGAN APITHY DIED DURING WEEK OF JANUARY 16 IN ABOMEY, WHERE HE WAS BEING HELD IN DETENTION ALONG WITH FORMER PRESIDENTS MAGA AND AHOMADEGBE. ACCORDING TO INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO US, APITHY DIED OF NATURAL CAUSES AROUND JANUARY 19 AND HIS BODY WAS BROUGHT TO COTONOU MORGUE WHERE IT IS CURRENTLY BEING HELD. GOVERNMENT OF PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BENIN (GPRB), HOWEVER, HAS MADE NO ANNOUNCEMENT AND, AT THE PRESENT TIME, THERE ARE NO INDICATIONS IT INTENDS TO DO SO.

2. COMMENT: DEATH OF APITHY WILL POSE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROBLEMS FOR GPRB ONCE THE DEMISE RECEIVES FULL PUBLICITY. OF THE TRIUMVIRATE OVERTHROWN BY PRESIDENT
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KEREKOU IN 1972, APITHY WAS THE MOST POPULAR. HIS POLITICAL SUPPORT CAME PRIMARILY FROM THE AREA OF PORTO-NOVO, BENIN'S OFFICIAL CAPITAL, AND A CENTER OF MERCANTILE ACTIVITY. ALTHOUGH APITHY APPARENTLY DIED OF NATURAL CAUSES, THE LONGER GPRB TRIES TO KEEP SILENT THE NEWS OF HIS DEATH, THE MORE PEOPLE WILL BE INCLINED TO SUSPECT THE GOVERNMENT OF BEING RESPONSIBLE FOR HIS DEATH. ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE, THE

DETENTION OF THE THREE AGED FORMER PRESIDENTS HAS BEEN A MATTER OF CONCERN TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, AND THE FACT THAT APITHY DIED IN CONFINEMENT IS LIABLE TO RESURRECT QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE GPRB'S HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY.

3. THE THREE PRESIDENTS HAVE REPRESENTED A MAJOR DILEMA FOR THE GPRB. WHILE THE KEREKOU REGIME HAS BEEN RELUCTANT TO RELEASE THEM FOR FEAR THAT THEY MIGHT ORGANIZE SOME FORM OF RESISTENCE, IT HAS BEEN EMBARRASSED IN HUMAN RIGHTS TERMS BY KEEPING THEM UNDER DETENTION. IN LATE 1976 PRESIDENT KEREKOU OFFERED THEM AMNESTY AND RELEASE BUT THE THREE PRESIDENTS REFUSED ON GROUNDS THAT THEY WERE TOO OLD TO LEAVE BENIN AND, IF DOMESTIC UNREST WERE TO BREAK OUT, THEY WOULD BE MADE SCAPEGOATS. SHORTLY THEREAFTER COTONOU SUFFERED A MERCENARY ATTACK, AFTER WHICH THE THREE PRESIDENTS WERE TRANSFERRED FROM THEIR COMFORTABLE HOUSE ARREST NEAR PORTO-NOVO TO MORE RIGOROUS CONDITIONS OF A MILITARY CAMP NEAR ABOMEY. FORMER PRESIDENT MAGA, ALSO A POPULAR FIGURE, IS SAID TO BE SERIOUSLY ILL WITH CANCER AND COULD DIE VERY SHORTLY. AS MAGA REPRESENTS THE NORTH, HIS DEATH IN DETENTION WOULD MEAN THAT GPRB MIGHT SOON BE FACING DOMESTIC CRITICISM FROM TWO OF ITS MOST IMPORTANT REGIONS.

THOMPSON

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